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While Reagan is away, conservative adviser is expected to be ousted

By Ralph Z. Hallow
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Conservatives in and out of the administration fear they are about to lose an anti-communist ally in the White House.

Constantine Menges, special assistant to the president for national security affairs, will be asked to leave in a few days and perhaps as early as Monday, according to sources.

As a presidential adviser who has always kept a low profile, Mr. Menges was, until last summer, the highest ranking Latin affairs specialist on the National Security Council staff.

Conservatives said "accommodationists" at the State Department and in the White House were responsible for easing Mr. Menges out of that position and for replacing him with a career bureaucrat.

Though Mr. Menges has remained as a special assistant to the president, he has been kept outside the mainstream of foreign-policy drafting.

It is said that the position change last summer was sold to the president, who has praised Mr. Menges in public, as a promotion.

Sources said Mr. Menges' termination has been "in the works for a long time," and that with President Reagan and his top advisers off in Asia for the economic summit, Mr. Menges has been called to a Monday breakfast with Rodney B. McDaniel, a deputy of National Security Adviser John Poindexter, when he will be told the news.

"One thing conservatives don't understand is when the presidential entourage moves out of town is when something like this happens," said a former senior staff member of the Reagan White House. "Who is going to pick up the phone and try to get Don Regan in on this today?"

"I'm just surprised that conservatives are always surprised by it," he added. "Every time the president goes out of town, I fear the worst, because that's when the gremlins move."

Mr. Menges' antagonists have never accused him of being disloyal to the president or to Mr. Reagan's foreign policy aims, but rather of having "ruffled feathers" in the foreign policy and national security communities.

In fact, Mr. Menges is credited with having

warned very early in the Nicaraguan drama that many of those who tried to pass themselves off as nationalists in the Sandinista coalition were actually Marxists.

A White House official yesterday said Mr. Menges had aroused antagonism within some administration circles for being "very effective in defending the president's Central American policy and its most difficult elements, which are insisting on democracy [in Nicaragua] and aid to the freedom fighters" opposing the Sandinista government.

Jeane Kirkpatrick, former United Nations ambassador, called Mr. Menges "one of the two or three most knowledgeable members of our government on matters involving Central America. Not having him would be a substantial loss of great magnitude."

A former State Department official, who asked not to be named, said, "If they are getting rid of Constantine, it's the final triumph of the gray-faced bureaucrats. It's shameful."

"Constantine brings realism and understanding when it comes to dealing with the tactics and strategy of our adversaries in the region, which of course is why he is being booted," the former official added.

"I'm not surprised," former U.N. Ambassador Charles M. Lichenstein said. "Ever since he was demoted upward, I have had very strong feeling that since he wouldn't shut up, they would be out to get rid of him."

Mr. Lichenstein said Mr. Menges "keeps telling the truth about Soviet strategy in Central America and he keeps on talking about the unfolding of the Soviet plan for the flanking of America in the southern backyard."

A White House official opposed to Mr. Menges' firing called him an effective coordinator of Reagan policies on Capitol Hill. "Here is a person who worked loyally and extremely effectively for the president and has wide respect on the Hill," he said.

Sources on Capitol Hill yesterday said Rep. Dan Burton, Indian Republican, was circulating a letter among colleagues. The letter, to be forwarded to the White House, was said to call for more instead of fewer Reagan appointees in senior positions on the National Security Council and at the State Department.

Though Mr. Burton refused to discuss the contents of the letter, he said he was upset not only by Mr. Menges' possible departure but by the constant drain in general, from the NSC and the State Department, of people who share Mr. Reagan's philosophy.

"Some in the bureaucracy have a weaker position than Mr. Menges in dealing with communists in Central America and elsewhere," said Mr. Burton, who is a member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

What's needed in the administration, he said, are more people who, like Mr. Reagan and Mr. Menges, think the Sandinistas in Nicaragua should be held to the promises they made to the Organization of American States in 1979 for free elections and a free press, among other things.

"The gist of this letter," said Mr. Burton, "is to make sure the NSC and State Department leadership positions are occupied by those who share the president's political philosophy and foreign-policy objectives and are willing to go to the mat against those in the bureaucracy who oppose the president."

He bemoaned the tendency to fill ambassadorships and other posts, when they become open, with career diplomats rather than someone who is strong in Reaganite philosophy.

The problem with career diplomats is that they may be eager to negotiate settlement that might not be as strong as the president is trying to achieve. Such persons, Mr. Burton says, should not be in a position to make those decisions.

"The president was elected by all the people and he should have people who share his views formulating and executing foreign policy decisions," he said.